

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS: AN APOCRYPHAL INTERPOLATION?

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The story in Luke 16:19–31 may have been written for Virtutes Iohanni, a Gnostic gospel written an author acquainted with both the original form of Luke (i.e., the parable of the prodigal son) and the Gospel of John (i.e., the resurrection of Lazarus), and interpolated by others into the text of the canonical gospel before 180 C.E. It fits the apocryphal narrative but not the Lukan context, and Ignatius does not seem to know this story. The connection of ideas between the preceding and following verses in Luke also suggests an interpolation, as does its uncharacteristic opening doublet, an unlikely sequence of events in the resulting narrative, and a peculiar eschatology. This cautions against basing doctrine on this particular story.

Key Words: Luke, Luke 16:19–31, hermeneutics, canon, New Testament, church fathers

1. Introduction

There is some evidence that the narrative, or “parable,”¹ of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) is not genuine Lukan material, but has been interpolated into the text of the gospel at an early date,² as the following pages will attempt to show. Interpolations of entire incidents or narratives in the canonical gospels are a well-studied and recognized phenomenon, including the *Pericope adulterae* (John 7:53–8:11), which appears in no ancient Greek manuscript or version,³ but has apparently been taken from the apocryphal *Gospel of the Hebrews*,⁴ and inserted either in John or in Luke 21 (be-

¹ Though the subject matter of the narrative, i.e. the “other world,” is sufficient to argue that it is meant as a parable, on the other hand it is unique in many ways, including the fact that one character, the beggar, is identified by name, which is never done elsewhere in Jesus’ parables.

² The earliest manuscript available for this part of Luke is P⁷⁵ (papyrus Bodmer XIV), from the 3rd century.

³ The earliest Greek manuscript containing it is the bilingual codex Bezae (D), from the 6th century, where the Greek text seems to proceed from the Latin one which faces the page.

⁴ Papias (2nd century) *apud* Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.17.

tween vv. 37 and 38).⁵ In the case of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the evidence similarly suggests that the narrative has been taken from an apocryphal gospel, even though no extant manuscript of Luke can be cited for omission of the story.⁶

2. External Evidence

While there are internal indications that the story is apocryphal, which will be mentioned later, the clearest evidence is perhaps external, to be derived from the continuation of the story found in another early document. *Virtutes Iohanni* ("The [Miraculous] Powers of John"),⁷ the source of the traditional account of the apostle being thrown into boiling oil by the emperor Domitian, contains a story (VI 45–55) about two young men who had sold their possessions in order to follow John only to regret later losing their riches. The apostle restores their property, but then warns about the perils of wealth by repeating, almost verbatim, the Lazarus narrative of Luke 16:19–31, ending with the words: "Abraham said to him: If they believe not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe, if one rise again."⁸ The text of *Virtutes* then continues:

And these words our Lord and Master confirmed by examples of mighty works: for when they said to him: Who hath come hither from thence that we may believe him? He answered: Bring hither the dead whom ye have. And when they had brought unto him a young man which was dead, he was waked up by him as one that sleepeth, and confirmed all his words.

It is usually accepted that the apostle John in this work here "quotes the story of Lazarus, Luke 16:19ff., as expanded by an apocryphal narrative of the raising of a dead man."⁹ The risen man character in the apocryphal

⁵ See the critical apparatus in the standard editions of the Greek text of the New Testament.

⁶ Some very early manuscripts, e.g., p⁴⁶, have reached us in incomplete form and so cannot be cited either way.

⁷ Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis* (Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 2; Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1983), 750–853.

⁸ English translation by Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924, repr. 1955), as *Acts of John*.

⁹ Wilhelm Schneemelcher, Edgar Hennecke and Robert McLachlan Wilson, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha* (2 vols.; London: Lutterworth, 1965), 2:204.

source of *Virtutes* is patterned, at least in part, after Lazarus of Bethany (John 11). This is shown by the following details:

(1) The resurrected person is a young man (*adulescens*), just as Lazarus of Bethany, under the care of his sisters, appears to be (John 11:3, 5 and *passim* in chapters 11 and 12).

(2) The resurrection takes place when "he was waked up by [Jesus] as one that sleepeth," just as in John 11:11 Jesus refers to Lazarus as "sleeping" and is thereby misunderstood by the disciples.

(3) The resurrected youth becomes a powerful witness for Jesus, as the risen Lazarus was (John 11:45).

To be sure, there are also differences. The dead youth of *Virtutes* was brought to Jesus, while the Lazarus of John 11 remained in the grave until Jesus went to him. This is required by the argumentative frame of the apocryphal story, since Jesus could hardly be represented as inviting his opponents to make a round of the graves. Differences of this kind are the very *raison d'être* of the apocryphal New Testament.

Apparently, then, the resurrected young man of the apocryphal narrative should be identified with the Lazarus of John 11. He "confirmed all [the] words" of Jesus cited in Luke 16:19–31, the protagonist of which is also named Lazarus. This Lazarus had been proposed as a resurrected messenger (16:27), and may in fact be referring to the same person.¹⁰ This raises the question of the mutual relationship between the apocryphal story and the canonical gospels of John and Luke. Does the apocryphal source of *Virtutes* depend on both canonical gospels for this conflation of Lazarus stories, or is it, on the contrary, a source for at least one of them?

There is no reason to deny the priority of the narrative of the fourth gospel over the apocryphal source. In contrast, the apocryphon seems to have contained the original form of the rich man and Lazarus narrative, as shown by the way the contents seem to fit the context. The story can be outlined as follows:

¹⁰ Even though Abraham predicts the failure of the warning through the resurrected Lazarus, the petition is not really refused in the extant part of the story. In many of the stories of these apocryphal sources, including *Virtutes*, miracles are allowed even if they have a temporary or illusory effect only – a typical expression of Gnostic hostility to the visible world.

1. *A reversal in the states of the living and the dead* (vv. 19–23)
 - a. Enjoyments of the living rich (v. 19)
 - b. Sufferings of the poor Lazarus while alive (vv. 20–21)
 - c. Death of the rich man and Lazarus (v. 22)
 - d. Sufferings of the rich man in the afterlife (v. 23a–b)
 - e. Enjoyment of Lazarus in the afterlife (v. 23c–d)
2. *The unchangeableness of each state* (vv. 24–31)
 - a. Request for physical relief (v. 24)
 - b. Request for relief refused (vv. 25–26)
 - c. Request that Lazarus be resurrected as a messenger (vv. 27–28)
 - d. Request dismissed as unnecessary (v. 29)
 - e. Appeal to the value of a resurrection (v. 30)
 - f. Resurrection predicted to fail as a warning (v. 31)

While the purpose of vv. 19–26 may be related to the context in Luke, where the Pharisees are said to be “lovers of riches” (16:14), the point of vv. 27–31 within this gospel is much less clear. These verses discuss the value of a warning to be sent through Lazarus, risen from the dead. The topic of afterlife and resurrection is therefore prominent in this part. But there is no discussion of resurrection in the immediate context, and indeed, lovers of riches as those addressed by Jesus may have been the Pharisees who never questioned the concept of an afterlife as the Sadducees did. Therefore “many have concluded that the second part of the parable is secondary [i.e. not original],”¹¹ though the unity of the story has also been upheld.¹²

In fact, both ideas seem to be correct: the story is a unit and not native to the gospel. In contrast to Luke’s context, the apocryphal source sets the story of Lazarus next to the challenge of those who argued that none “hath come hither from thence, that we may believe him,” provoking Jesus to raise the dead youth to life for confirmation. More importantly, the words “if they believe not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe, if one rise again” (16:31) apparently serve as a purported prediction of the hardened reaction of the Jewish aristocracy after the resurrection of Lazarus (John 12:10, 11, 37–43). In this way, the story of the beggar Lazarus fits perfectly the apocryphal source, but not the gospel of Luke. This suggests that

¹¹ Francois Bovon, *El Evangelio según San Lucas* (trans. A. Piñero Sáenz; 3 vols.; Salamanca: Sígueme, 2004), 3:142. Citation translated from the Spanish by the present author.

¹² Richard Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 225–46.

the narrative was created for the apocryphon and not for the canonical gospel.

3. Literary Relationships

Even though the beggar Lazarus narrative seems original to the apocryphal source and therefore earlier than the form in which it appears in Luke,¹³ there is also evidence that the apocryphon is later than other parts of the gospel of Luke. For example, the beggar Lazarus story, in all its extant forms, contains an unexpected echo of Luke 15:16. Lazarus at the door of the rich man (16:21) is variously described in the extant manuscripts of Luke, some coinciding with *Virtutes*. In the fullest form, he lay there “desiring to fill up his belly with the crumbs that fell from the table of the rich man, and no man gave unto him.”¹⁴ Even in its shortest form, he lay “desiring (ἐπιθυμῶν) to fill up his belly (χορτασθῆναι) with what fell from the table of the rich man.” In 15:16 the prodigal son is also said to have desired (ἐπεθύμει) to fill up his belly (χορτασθῆναι) with the husks eaten by the swine, “and no one gave unto him.”

The poor man’s desire to “fill his belly” is toned down by most English versions (including the KJV) in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, while it is forcefully expressed in the case of the prodigal son.¹⁵ These versions of Luke 16 render the phrase “desiring to be fed” (KJV, RSV), “longing to eat” (NIV) or some similar expression. This hides the echo of Luke 15 in chapter 16, which the translators have not felt necessary to reproduce, as it is completely uncalled for in Luke 16. In contrast, the original Greek text has ἐπιθυμῶ and χορτασθῆναι in Luke 16:21, just as in 15:16. This particular description of the cravings of a hungry man can hardly be supposed to be a standard feature of Jesus’ narrative style, so as to appear repeatedly in the gospel. The Lazarus story, then, must have been created outside Luke.

¹³ For example, the rich man sees Lazarus only, and addresses to him alone the request of dipping a finger to cool his mouth; the one who answers, rather incongruously, is not Lazarus, however, but Abraham. Such inconsistencies show the secondary character of *Virtutes*, which quotes a narrative like the present form of Luke, in which the rich man saw and addressed Abraham also.

¹⁴ This is the author’s translation of the reading of the \mathfrak{f}^{3} (Ferrar) family of manuscripts.

¹⁵ The sense of the passive form used in both passages is given as “eat one’s fill” in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957), 892, citing as a model Revelation 19:21, where vultures “gorge” themselves with corpse flesh.

This, and the fact that the apocryphal source of *Virtutes* appears to be earlier than Luke 16:19–31, but later than other parts of Luke, is consistent with the idea that such apocryphon was the source used by the interpolator of this story in Luke (see the following diagram of textual relationships).

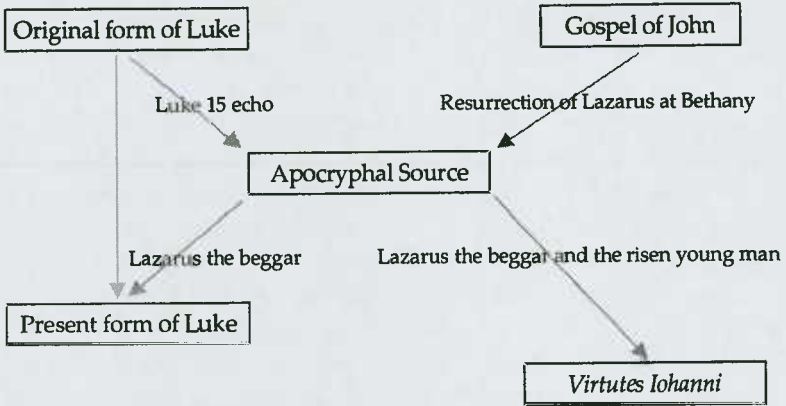


Figure 1: Diagram of Textual Relationships

The echo may have been created by unconscious influence of the parable of the prodigal son or, which seems more likely, by deliberate imitation.¹⁶ The author was not creating the story specifically for insertion in Luke, but for a separate gospel narrative, so he had no reason to avoid the echo from the prodigal son story here.

Once inserted in Luke, however, the Lazarus story lost clarity. As seen above, deprived of its original context, the point of the second half of the story is unclear. The discussion on the value of the testimony of "one risen from the dead" finds no referent in the absence of Lazarus of Bethany or a similar character. In addition, since the "no man gave unto him" fragment was amputated in most manuscripts (perhaps in order to tone down the unexpected echo of the parable of the prodigal son, as the English versions did later), even learned interpreters today can find no indication of the rich man's guilt anywhere in the story,¹⁷ and think that its point is merely the

¹⁶ This would make a lot of sense. With this single brush stroke, the author of the story depicted the pitiful emptiness in the stomach of the hungry beggar and the insensitivity of the revelers, with the greater responsibility falling upon the shoulders of the rich homeowner. The echo from a well-known parable of Jesus also helped to give his composition a "gospel flavor."

¹⁷ They have even supposed the opposite. For example, W. Russell Bowie, "Gospel of Luke," *IB* 8:281, suggests that the rich man "not only gave Lazarus scraps from his ta-

automatic reversal of fortunes after death. However, the original apocryphal form of the story would not have left its readers wondering about the motivation for sending the rich man to the fire: "no man gave unto" Lazarus (οὐδείς ἐδίδου αὐτῷ in the Ferrar manuscripts of Luke, *nemo illi dabat* in *Virtutes*), implying that the rich man was stingy and refused to share. Such lack of clarity in the supposedly Lukan form of the story, contrasted with clearly made points in the apocryphal source, again indicating the true source of the story.

Arguing that the apocryphon is later than the original Luke, but earlier than the present form of Luke, may seem at first to propose a very complex literary history. However, this is always the case when interpolations are taken from a later source, as in the *Pericope adulterae*. The apocryphon used by *Virtutes* is not available as such at present. Many apocryphal gospels were composed in the first three centuries of the Christian era, especially by Gnostic sectarians, imitating the style and phraseology of the canonical gospels. They then used these gospels as a propaganda scheme for their views. Origen (3rd century) noted: "The church has four gospels, the sects very many, one of which is called 'According to the Egyptians' [...]"¹⁸ The vast majority of these works, because of their heretical ideas, were destroyed by the Catholic church after Constantine, so they are largely lost. Some of the stories narrated in those works, however, were kept for use as valid "traditions" in hagiography (as, for example, *Virtutes*,¹⁹ which is mainly a catholicized form of the Gnostic Acts of John) and occasionally, as in the case of the *Pericope adulterae*, for interpolations in the canonical New Testament.

An often-quoted monograph on the beggar Lazarus story has shown the possible influence of an ancient Egyptian tale, still extant in a papyrus from the first century B.C.E., through Jewish adaptations.²⁰ In the Middle Ages, the name of the rich man in the gospel story appears sometimes as

ble, but contributed generously to charity."

¹⁸ Quoted in Edgar J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature* (rev. by Robert M. Grant; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 42.

¹⁹ According to pseudo-Mellitus, Leucius (the known author of the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* and reputed author of *Acts of John*) "told true things about the [miraculous] powers which the Lord exercised through them [the apostles John, Andrew and Thomas], while about their doctrine he has lied a great lot" (*de doctrina vero eorum plurimum mentitus est*); Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 5:1240b.

²⁰ Hugo Gressmann, *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus: eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1918); see *IB* 8:288–89.

"Amonofis" (Amenophis).²¹ These Egyptian associations suggest that the story might proceed from the *Gospel of the Egyptians* mentioned by Origen, but could also derive from the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which was equally current in Egypt and is known to have given some of its incidents a distinctive Lukan flavor.²²

4. Patristic Attestation

Patristic writers serve as external witnesses to the preservation of the biblical text, since their works were transmitted independently and included Bible quotations. The evidence they offer for the beggar Lazarus story is inconclusive. Irenaeus, at the end of the 2nd century, made abundant use of the story,²³ which he knew as part of the canonical Gospel of Luke.²⁴ This is not surprising, since it is also present in a papyrus of Luke almost of the same age.²⁵ However, earlier Church Fathers do not refer to it. Ignatius (ca. 120 C.E.), in *Magn.* 12, quotes in the same breath Luke 17:10 and 16:15, i.e., from a few verses both before and after the story in the present form of Luke. The nature of his context is such that a reference to the rich man and Lazarus is not necessarily expected. It is equally fair to say that he would not have hurt his parenetical conclusion ("Be ye therefore also of a humble spirit, that ye may be exalted, for 'he that abaseth himself shall be exalted, and he that exalteth himself shall be abased' [Luke 14:11]") by pointing out the rich man's abasement, and poor Lazarus' exaltation, since he was already quoting from this page in Luke. There is, therefore, a very real possibility that his copy of the gospel of Luke did not include the story.

5. Internal Evidence

The internal evidence within the gospel of Luke should also be considered. If the story is indeed interpolated, how would the original text of Luke have read at this point? The transition of 16:18 to 17:1 would have been smooth:

²¹ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 166.

²² Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, 45. This includes the *Pericope adulterae*; see IB 8:592.

²³ *Adv. Haer.* 2.34.1, ANF 1:411.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 3.14.3, ANF 1:438.

²⁵ See footnote 2 above.

(16:17) "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one dot of the law to become void (16:18) Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." (17:1) And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin [margin: 'stumbling-blocks'] are sure to come, but woe to him by whom they come!" (RSV)

In 16:15–18 Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees (16:14), many of whom taught that "it is lawful to divorce one's wife for [whatever] cause" (Matt 19:3). Since this teaching may result in double adultery (Luke 16:18), it is indeed a stumbling-block tripping into sin the "little ones" (17:2), i.e., the simple people who trusted religious teachers. In this connection, the saying in 17:1–2 seems to belong to the same condemnation of Pharisaic doctrine introduced in 16:15–17. In contrast, after the interruption produced by the story of the rich man and Lazarus in the present form of Luke, the saying in 17:1–2 appears "unrelated."²⁶ Such effect argues, again, that this story is not a part of the original composition of the gospel.

Other internal evidences indicate the same. Two consecutive narratives in present Luke (the unfaithful steward, the rich man and Lazarus) open with the same clause, not used elsewhere: Ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος, lit. "a certain man was rich" (Luke 16:1, 19). Doublets of this type, though common in unified compositions in other kinds of literature, are not true to the style of the gospels, and so add to the suspicions.

Strings of parables with the same general point are a feature of the gospels, notably of Luke (as, for example, in chapter 15), but they are never addressed repeatedly to a sneering audience. The Pharisees, when they overheard the first story from Jesus, "scoffed at him" because they were "lovers of money" (16:14). It is not very likely, then, that the original author of Luke would represent Jesus as telling yet another story with a similar point to these unrepentant lovers of riches, and launching it with exactly the same opening. Such choice of words by Jesus would only have invited more sarcasm.

In contrast, the rest of the Lukan material shows that Jesus countered their sarcasm, not merely by standing his ground on the issue of caring for the poor, but by passing to the offensive, with an attack on their teachings. Jesus assaulted the Law-based Pharisaic doctrine of self-justification (16:15–16), while upholding the need to obey God's law (16:17–18). The present form of Luke makes Jesus return at this point to the previous topic, with a reflective

²⁶ IB 8:293.

and didactic stance, by telling the Pharisees the rich-man-and-Lazarus story. This change of tenor in the words of Jesus and his weaving back and forth between topics does not ring true in a conflictive situation such as this, where the Pharisees "were sneering" (16:14 NIV) at Jesus, who in turn was denouncing the former in strong personal terms: "You are the ones who justify yourselves [...]" (16:15). Such lack of verisimilitude in the sequence of events within the gospel unit, again, argues that the second narrative is not an integral part of the original composition of Luke.

This being the case, why was this context selected by the interpolator? Apparently, he decided to insert this story near genuine materials touching on the same general subject, i.e., caring for the poor as a way to lay up treasure in heaven, so he placed it almost immediately after a parable which ends with such an exhortation (16:9).²⁷ But he could not avoid leaving some traces of his editorial work. As seen above, both internal and external evidences remain so as to reject the authenticity of the Rich Man and Lazarus story.

6. Conclusion

The character of this evidence is not as compelling as the case of the *Pericope adulterae*, because of the lack of confirmatory omissions in the manuscripts of Luke. On the other hand, the content of the adulteress story corresponds better to the known character of the teachings of Jesus than the Rich Man and Lazarus story. Though salvation is definitely individual in the New Testament, its realization will come simultaneously to all the saved at the end of time (Matt 25:31–46; Heb 11:39, 40). In contrast, both the rich man and Lazarus receive rewards and punishments during the lifetime of other men. This piecemeal eschatology is uncharacteristic of the teachings of Jesus.²⁸ In view of the accumulated evidence reviewed above, the story of

²⁷ This, in turn, created the problem of justifying the addition of another parable with the same point. Perhaps in order to alleviate this problem, he did not juxtapose the beggar Lazarus story immediately after the parable of the unfaithful steward, but only after the gospel narrative has moved from Jesus teaching his disciples to Jesus addressing the Pharisees, and just before he addresses his disciples again. In this way, Jesus appears to be teaching one parable to each group, thus justifying the use of both accounts. For some reason, however, he would not or could not avoid repetition in the opening statements of these accounts. Perhaps he felt bound to respect a well-known beginning for the Rich Man and Lazarus story, already circulating (in the apocryphon) as the very words of Jesus.

²⁸ To look no farther afield, the reasoning used by Jesus to demonstrate a future general

the Rich Man and Lazarus is at least suspect. Even if it were genuinely Lukan, its parabolic form would advise against making it into a *sedes doctrinae*. The evidence for an apocryphal origin of the story makes this even more necessary.

resurrection, a few chapters ahead (Luke 20:37–39 par. Mark 12:26–27)—i.e., that the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” cannot be merely a God of long-dead people, so those patriarchs must one day return to life—will simply not mesh with the Lazarus story. It may readily be seen that the idea of a present “Abraham’s bosom,” in any form whatsoever, cancels any need for a future resurrection in order to give abiding significance to those Old Testament worthies.